

Spáčilová, Jana

Libretto as a source of Baroque scenography in the Czech lands : ad honorem Jiří Hilmera

Theatralia. 2011, vol. 14, iss. 1, pp. 82-97

ISBN 978-80-210-5571-1

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/115546>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.



Jana Spáčilová

Libretto as a Source of Baroque Scenography in the Czech Lands *Ad honorem Jiří Hilmera*

Traditional sources for the study of Baroque scenography fall into three categories: (i) visual documents (stage designs, theatre plans, period illustrations of specific productions); (ii) written documents (inventories, book accounts); and (iii) the surviving material fabric of extant theatres. Jiří Hilmera established these categories in his seminal work of Czech theatre history, *The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Perspective Stage in Bohemia* (HILMERA 1965). My present study propounds a fourth, mostly neglected, source for the study of Baroque scenography: the opera libretto.¹ Before coming to a discussion of the libretto as a source of early eighteenth-century scenography, I summarise here the principles of Baroque staging and give a short survey of historical court theatres in Czech-speaking territories. General characteristics of Baroque staging are compared and contrasted throughout this essay with the 1766 stage of the Castle Theatre in Český Krumlov, which serves as my major point of departure.

The most common type of eighteenth-century theatre was the ‘*coulisse*’ stage

¹ Jiří Hilmera considered the libretto also, namely in his unpublished lecture ‘*Scénická podoba představení ve šporkovském divadle*’ (The Scenic Form of the Performance in the Sporck Theatre), organised by the Early Music Society (*Společnost pro starou hudbu*) in September 1985. Hilmera kindly gave me a copy of his text when an earlier version of this study was read as a lecture at the Theatre Studies Society series at the Theatre Institute in Prague on October 18th, 2007.

LIBRETTO AS A SOURCE OF BAROQUE SCENOGRAPHY

(sometimes referred to as the *illusive perspective* stage or the *proscenium* stage). This consisted of two rows of side-wings on both sides of the stage with a backdrop enclosing the space upstage. The upper part of the stage was decorated with several rows of horizontal borders, the number of which corresponded to the number of wings being used. The diminishing size and shrinking scale of the illustrations on similarly designed wings, together with a raked stage floor, created an illusion of depth, which was further augmented by perspective painting on both wings and backdrop. The illusion of space was one of the most valued features of the Baroque ideal; and in some theatre buildings of this period, the stage space was as deep as the auditorium, sometimes even deeper. In a very few theatres, the backdrop and the back wall were even removable, offering a view of the open space of an adjacent garden (as was the case with the theatre in Valtice/Feldsberg).

A complete scenic design consisted of several backdrops, borders and a certain number of wing pieces; this is referred to in this article as the *decorative set*. The number of wings and borders was determined by the depth of the stage that was being used for a particular scene, which was in turn decided upon by the location to be represented: an interior chamber scene was thus shallower than an open courtyard scene (and thus needed less wings and borders); the deepest (and most modularly complex) scenes were large halls, temples or landscapes. In the Castle Theatre at Český Krumlov, the set for a representation of a jail accordingly contains only two pairs of wings and borders, together with a backdrop (which was located just six-and-a-half metres upstage of the proscenium arch). By contrast, the deepest interior scene (representing a temple) consists of seven side wings, three standing flats and a backdrop that was suspended almost twice as far upstage as in the previous example.

Relatively sophisticated wooden and iron stage machinery (as well as systems of ropes and pulleys above, below and to the sides of the stage) enabled rapid changes of the entire scenic image, that is: the wings, borders and backdrop all moved at once, in a matter of seconds. Scene changes could and did accordingly take place with the curtain drawn, but without stopping the action of the play. Most theatres had the possibility of two scene changes within each act, thanks to three sets of *coulisses* that were pre-set and layered one behind the other. Unsurprisingly, the technical possibilities of theatres of this period correspond exactly with the scenic demands outlined in or implied by the librettos of Baroque operas – almost all of which call for three decorative sets in each act.

The usual side wings were at times complemented by suspended or standing flats (the latter held by angled-braces) as well as by layered backdrops. Standing flats and layered backdrops were the standard means of staging caves, huts, bowers

and military tents. Larger objects placed on the stage (such as altars, statues, trees or bushes) were more simple two-dimensional representations painted on canvas flattage of an appropriate size. Any seeming plasticity was thus suggested by the illusive painting of such flats and by their juxtaposition against (and location within) a more complex three-dimensional environment created by the wings, borders and backdrops. The only real three-dimensional stage properties present were thrones, chairs and tables, usually placed on stage by supernumeraries (librettos contain concrete instructions to this effect). The more complex decorative sets (requiring a longer time to set up) regularly appear in the first scenes of an act, right after the curtain is drawn. The backdrop of a shallower scene could thus often serve as a makeshift ‘curtain’ to mask preparations for less complex scene changes (going on behind this screen), whilst the action of the opera took place (in front of it).

In the geographical region covered by today’s Czech Republic, there are several historical *coulisse* stages. The earliest and most important is the Castle Theatre at Český Krumlov, dating from 1766. This structure has survived in its original state with complete and still-functional stage equipment (HILMERA 1958; SLAVKO and FLAŠKOVÁ 2001). This is also the only Czech theatre with working machinery that enables the study of Baroque stage practice. Other theatres come from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such structures include the chateau theatres at: Litomyšl (1797); Kozel (1830); Mnichovo Hradiště (1833); Kačina (1851); and Žleby (pre-1870). These buildings are concisely documented in Antonín Bartušek’s study of Czech aristocratic theatres (BARTUŠEK 1963). From the scenographic point of view, the most interesting of the later theatres is that in Litomyšl, where the decorations were the work of leading stage designer Josef Platzer (see HILMERA 1957; BLÁHA 2009; SRBA 2009).

No theatres predating 1750 are extant; notwithstanding this unfortunate fact, however, information on such structures may partly be reconstructed from historical accounts. With a view to the topic of this text, I will concentrate on those venues where Italian opera was produced (although there is much more information than I shall here present were one to write on *coulisse* stages in general). Performances of the Italian opera in Prague date from 1724 (when Count Franz Anton Sporck offered the theatre in his palace in Hybernská Street to the opera company of Antonio Denzio and Antonio Maria Peruzzi). Before the end of that year, Peruzzi and part of the troupe left for Breslau (Wrocław) while Denzio continued to perform in Sporck’s theatre for another ten years, producing more than fifty operas there. The scenographers of Denzio’s company were Innocente Bellavite (the artist responsible for the 1725 reconstruction of the theatre), Vincenzo dal Buono (who is referred to in librettos between 1725 and 1729), and Giovanni Paolo Gaspari –

LIBRETTO AS A SOURCE OF BAROQUE SCENOGRAPHY

who created the new decorations after the fire of 1732 (FREEMAN 1992). In Brno, the operatic tradition started in 1732 when the impresario Angelo Mingotti settled there. The first season took place on the provisional stage of the municipal riding school (*Teatro alla Cavalleriza*); in that year, Mingotti employed local painters. When the new municipal theatre opened in 1733 in the tavern of *Horní náměstí* square (*Teatro della Taverna*, nowadays the Reduta Theatre in Zelný trh Square, the Venetian artist Federico Zanoia was summoned to undertake its decorations (HAVLÍČKOVÁ 2009). In 1735, Zanoia is also documented as the designer of the new theatre at Rottals' Chateau in Holešov, where opera had been performed two years previously (SEHNAL 1974).

Among the Moravian chateaux it is crucial to mention Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou, owned by Johann Adam Questenberg. The theatre at this site is unique amongst the earliest stagings of opera productions and also for its longevity; because operas were performed in Jaroměřice from at least 1723 until 1750. One entire wing of the chateau was dedicated to Questenberg's theatre. The equipment it used was repeatedly modified and innovated, with the last updating (in 1739) being in imitation of the machinery at Holešov. The designers involved with this theatre were Italian scenographer Giovanni Pellizuoli from Parma, Franz Anton Danné from Vienna, and local painters Ignác Buček and Jan Šetínský; however, documents also testify to the participation of Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena, who was also the tutor to both local scenographers (HELFERT 1916; PERUTKOVÁ 2011). Other important centres of the Italian opera were Kroměříž and Vyškov – the two seats of Wolfgang Hannibal Schrattenbach, the Bishop of Olomouc (SPÁČILOVÁ 2006a: 49-74). In Kroměříž, opera was performed from the year 1727; however, nothing is known about the theatre building; the earliest records of the venue date from the nineteenth century. The earliest evidence of opera performances in Vyškov comes from 1734. In 1736, the scenographer active there was Gaetano Fanti. Such documented names of scenographic artists testify to the pro-Italian orientation of operatic scenography in the Czech lands during the early eighteenth century, with most of the scenographers coming from Venice. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasised that most of these artists came to Czech theatres on the basis of their collaboration with Italian opera impresarios.

Detailed information on stage decorations in Czech Baroque theatres is missing. Nevertheless, if the numbers of decorative sets are recorded, each theatre usually had nine sets. This is the basic scenographic compliment of the Court Theatre in Tovačov (late seventeenth century), the Piarist School Theatre in Příbor (early eighteenth century) and the Piarist College at Bílá Voda (1734) – where the theatre was modelled on the Episcopal Theatre in Vyškov. Eight decorative sets are

recorded in 1748 as the equipment of the theatre in Jindřichův Hradec; ten sets are documented at the Municipal Theatre in the Tavern in Brno (HAVLÍČKOVÁ 2009: 156). A larger number – thirteen decorative sets – is known only at the Court Theatre in Holešov (1735), which was considered by contemporaries as a venue unique both for its construction and equipment (BARTUŠEK 1963: 115-116 (Tovačov); 192-194 (Holešov); 196-198 (Bílá Voda); 211-215 (Jindřichův Hradec); and 220-221 (Příbor)). However, in none of the above theatres is the actual structure of the decorative collection known, so even the exact number of decorative sets listed cannot be taken for granted. Everything depends on what the writers of historical documents took as an independent decorative set. Some sets may have consisted of the backdrop and a few accessories only (with side wings borrowed from another decorative set in order to make it fully functional); others could have represented more than one setting, with just the change of a backdrop (see below).

The only stage that offers concrete possibilities to study the materials used in Baroque scenography is the 1766 Castle Theatre at Český Krumlov. Although this venue was not built exclusively for opera, it is the most useful for my present study for the following reasons: (i) it is the earliest extant *coulisse* stage in the Czech-speaking territories, and its scenic equipment is the oldest in the world; (ii) archival documentation shows that its scenic equipment has survived in its entirety; (iii) despite its relatively late date, from a historical-aesthetic perspective, the decorations represent the technical and aesthetic culmination of Baroque scenography; (iv) general characteristics as well as concrete citations testify to the direct influence of Italian scenography, represented in particular by the figure of Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena (1695-1757); and (v) practice-based research in the form of experimental opera productions (organised since 1998) provides hands-on experience of numerous realisations of the staging requirements of Italian *opera seria* at smaller court theatres.² Another important point is that the Castle Theatre at Český Krumlov provides scholars not only with numerous extant decorative sets, but also allows us, through its wider holdings, to understand the artisanal and artistic process of their creation. The painting styles of Český Krumlov decorative sets are discussed by Jiří Hilmera (HILMERA 1958: note 4), in which he further develops the principles outlined in earlier studies. Recently, new interpretations have also been brought to this subject area by Pavel Zahradník (ZAHRADNÍK

² As a member of the *Hofmusici Ensemble* performing Baroque music, I have participated in the opera productions at Český Krumlov for over a decade now. For more information about performances, see the annual special issue *Barokní divadlo* of *Jihočeské listy*, and FRANKOVÁ and SPÁČILOVÁ, 2010.

LIBRETTO AS A SOURCE OF BAROQUE SCENOGRAPHY

2003), whose study is based on the most complete archival collections to date.

It was towards the end of 1765 that Jan Marchand, the Prague agent of Prince Schwarzenberg, and the painter Josef Hager started negotiations about new decorative sets for the Český Krumlov theatre (Mareš 1924-25; the original names for decorative sets discussed in my essay are taken from archival sources). In mid-December, Marchand received instructions that ‘the paintings in their changes should represent cities, woodlands, chambers and gardens’ (*Städten, Waldungen, Zimmern und Garten*). In January 1766, Hager provided Marchand with the outlines of the proscenium arch and several decorative sets: a royal hall, a chamber, a castle courtyard, a temple, a city, a prison, and a garden (*Sall, Zimmer, Cortil, Tempel, Stadt, Kerker, Garten*). Marchand sent the first four (including the outline for the proscenium arch) to Schwarzenberg in Vienna, but the prince changed his mind. On January 18th, 1766, Schwarzenberg signed a contract with court theatre painters Johann Wetschel and Leo Merkel. They were in that agreement commissioned to create the curtain, proscenium and seven decorative sets ‘with appropriate borders and backgrounds’ (*darzu gehörigen Sofiten, und Schluß Blättern*); the number of side wings was given exactly: a forest (*Wald*, 14 – i.e. 7 pairs of wings), a garden (*Garten*, 14), a chamber or a cabinet (*Zimmer oder Cabinette*, 10), a street (*Gasse*, 8), a prison (*Gefängnis*, 4), a sea harbour (*Meer Hafen*, 2), and a military camp (*Laager*, 14). It is worth noting that the first contract lacks the traditional decorative sets for typical spaces such as a hall or a temple. A year later, the commission for these two additional sets was completed. According to Schwarzenberg’s letter of February 14th, 1767 (addressed to Krumlov’s marshal, Jan Ambrožovský) the cited masters were ‘to add to the existing theatre decorations one ordinary chamber and a hall, with which a temple will be joined in the end’ (*ordinari Zimmer, und einem Saal, mit welchem am Ende ein Tempel verbunden werden solle*). In the final breakdown of accounts for the year 1767, these final decorative sets are listed with the exact numbers of wings again: an ordinary chamber (12), a hall (14), and a temple (6). The records also show that these painters produced not only the sets but also several stage properties (a magical tree, a rustic house and others); they also decorated the interior of the theatre building (ZAHRADNÍK 2003: note 16).

Almost every decorative set mentioned in the archival accounts survives to this day; the sole exception was one of the two wings originally belonging to the set for the sea harbour, which is now lost. These wings, representing cliffs, were to be used at the far ends of the scene, so the decorative set needed to be completed by wings from other sets (such as the wings of a street for the ‘harbour city’ set, or wings from a forest for the ‘countryside with a seashore’ set). The decorative sets for the hall and temple share some of the wings and differ in their last rows. The hall set is

shorter, closed by a backdrop representing rows of columns delineated in an angled perspective (*scena per angolo*), while the temple set is elongated by standing flats and layered backdrops, being finally closed by a single-axis perspective backdrop with the characteristic cupola of a temple. These two complex examples infer that in order to establish the number of scenic sets in any given scenographic repertory, a wide range of circumstances has to be taken into account. At Český Krumlov, the decorative set for a 'sea' consists in effect only of a backdrop (which was evidently added to other stock items), whereas a 'hall' and a 'temple' may be taken either as a single scenic set with two different backgrounds (as transpires from the 1767 commission), or as two scenic sets with shared side wings (which is how they appear, typically, in the final accounts). This instance also demonstrates how some decorative sets could be understood in a multivalent way, that is, that they could represent a variety of different locales: the shorter variant of the 'hall' set, for example, is marked as a 'hall chamber' (*Saalzimmer*) on the rigging ropes, whereas the longer variant of the same scene is recorded as a 'deep hall'. A similar ambiguity is to be found in the description a 'chamber or cabinet' in the contract of January 1766.

Thus we may see that one decorative set could be given different names; that it did not have to consist of a complete set of decorations (all side-wings, borders and a backdrop); and that combinations of different scenes to create multiple effects were usual. Given this knowledge, and the material conditions that pertain at Český Krumlov Castle Theatre, it is possible to establish the basic repertory of decorative sets that was considered central for the practices of court theatres during the mid-eighteenth century. These constitute interior scenes of: (i) a 'hall', (ii) a 'temple', (iii) a 'chamber', (iv) a 'jail'; as well as exterior scenes of: (v) a 'forest', (vi) a 'garden', (vii) a 'street', (viii) a 'harbour', and (ix) a 'military camp'. In compiling this repertory, I have taken into account J. Wetschel's and L. Merkel's extant decorations as well as the ways in which such scenery was commissioned, together with the decorative designs of the artist originally commissioned (J. Hager). Listing the 'hall' (i) and the 'temple' (ii) as two different decorative sets stems from Hager's designs, although in reality these were created from combined decorative sets. The 'forest' (v), the 'harbour' (viii) and the 'military camp' (ix) are missing in Hager's sketches; however, they were part of the original commission for Wetschel and Merkel, and are also present in the scenic depository of Český Krumlov Castle Theatre. A set of special interest is (x) an 'ordinary chamber'. The fact that it is missing among Hager's designs (as well as in the contract with the Viennese painters) and that it was made only upon an additional commission testifies to its exceptional or complementary character. The sober nature of this decorative set

LIBRETTO AS A SOURCE OF BAROQUE SCENOGRAPHY

differs markedly from the other sets, which use a wide array of expressive tools found in High-Baroque scenography. Essentially, Český Krumlov's decorative set for the 'ordinary chamber' (sometimes referred to as a 'burgher room') belongs to the approaching era, in which repertoire changes and aesthetic shifts introduce more realistic features into scenography. For that reason, this decorative set is left aside in what follows. One other set among Hager's designs deserves mention, however; it is the unrealised decorative set for (xi) a 'castle courtyard'. This is no longer present among Český Krumlov's holdings; so when storylines call for the location in current productions, it is done with the 'hall' set accompanied with more airy borders. The 'castle courtyard' set, however, played an important role in Baroque scenography, as will be discussed later in the section on opera librettos.

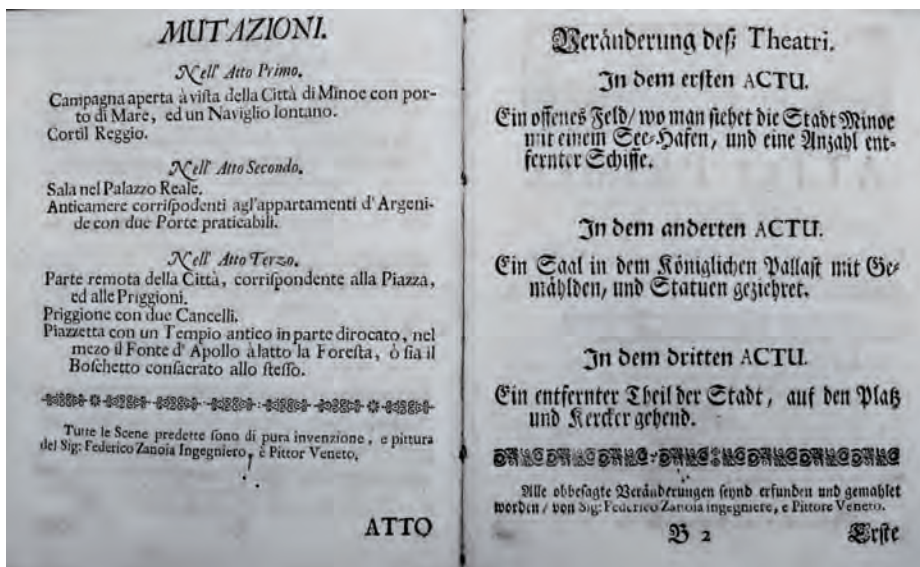
The identified number of nine (or eleven) decorative sets preserved in the theatre of Český Krumlov agrees with the most common number of fictional locations on the historical stages that have been mentioned above. Given this finding, the question to ask is whether these theatre houses operated with virtually identical decorative set types to Český Krumlov. The data sets that can be gleaned for six or seven theatre houses from an overall number of several score is, of course, far too small to derive general conclusions. The repertory of individual theatres has also to be taken into account: houses established predominantly for performances of the Italian opera were also used for other dramatic genres (such as Italian *intermezzi* or German 'comedies'); while school theatres had to be equipped with different scenography with a view to the spiritual themes of their repertoires. Nonetheless, the scenographic collection at Český Krumlov may be taken as the basis of an understanding that the scenic requirements of the Italian *dramma per musica* were the most generically demanding in the performance practice of Czech theatres during this period.

Among the historic documents relating to Baroque opera in Czech territories there are more than a hundred extant opera librettos, coming from town theatres and aristocratic stages hired by Italian impresarios (in Prague and Brno), as well as from private court theatres (in Kroměříž, Vyškov, Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou and Holešov). The Prague librettos are listed in Daniel E. Freeman's *The Opera Theater of Count Franz Anton von Sporck in Prague* (FREEMAN 1992: 233-279); Moravian librettos are recorded in my own study of early-eighteenth-century Italian librettos (SPÁČILOVÁ 2006b). Opera libretto functioned in its original meaning (*libretto* = booklet), as a theatre brochure issued for each new production. Besides the complete lyrics of the piece, it gave the names of the poet and the composer, the singers, dancing masters and others involved with the production. An indelible part of the libretto was the list of decorative sets, mostly entitled 'changes of scene'

(*Mutazioni di scene*). Individual locations were then given in detail in the relevant places in the text. The description of the stage in the initial list and the text of the libretto may have differed to some extent; but mostly these were little more than specifications and descriptions of details.

The significant disproportion of scholarly evidence between extant Baroque librettos on the one hand and historic theatre buildings and their sets on the other lies primarily in the large requirements evident in the librettos, and the low number of decorative sets – be they extant or referred to in archival documents – to which we have access. A sweeping majority of the opera repertoire in the eighteenth century consisted of unoriginal titles (but with new musical settings). The most popular librettos had originally been written for rich Italian or even Austrian theatres (such as Apostolo Zeno's texts for the Venetian *Teatro di San Giovanni Grisostomo*, or Metastasio's librettos for the Court Theatre in Vienna); such well-financed stages had no limitations with regards to the scenography they could accommodate, and could also afford to have new décor made for each new piece. This, however, was not the case for smaller theatres in lesser cities, or in variously wealthy aristocratic seats, although the repertoire was identical. These more 'minor' theatres (which does not necessarily mean that the stages had to be small) generally had only the elementary equipment of ten decorative sets at their disposal; such a collection of decorative sets was commonly purchased as one commission, and served for several years – perhaps with small changes and additions. It might be inferred that theatre productions in minor theatres adjusted their scenic requirements; however, the opposite is true. Comparison of original librettos with theatre productions in other theatres reveals that, despite numerous changes in the text, the instructions for décor underwent changes only very exceptionally, and were mostly quoted verbatim.

If details in the descriptions of scenes are disregarded – such as the architectonic embellishments (*Sala nel palazzo reale ornata di pitture, e di statue*) or narrower specifications of the locations (*Spiaggia di mare con veduta della città di Napoli in lontano*) – scenic requirements in principle call only for a limited set of decorative types. This was the conclusion that Jiří Hilmera formulated in *The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Perspective Stage in Bohemia* (HILMERA 1965). Hilmera's methodology was rooted in an iconographic analysis of the stage designs of famous Baroque scenographers; however, the same conclusions are equally valid for the descriptions of scenes in librettos, since scenographers worked closely with librettists. Hilmera outlines the elementary collections of 'eleven to thirteen main sets of scenery, which served each theatre of this period for years on end, since different sets of scenery appeared on a highly exceptional basis' (HILMERA 1965:



The Changes of Scene for the Opera Pastiche *Argenide*, which was Performed at the *Teatro della Taverna* in Brno during the Carnival of 1734. Bottom left gives the name of the scenographer Federico Zanoia 'Ingegniero è Pittor Veneto'. Moravian Library, Brno. Sign. ST1-0242.157.

32). These basic scenes, in later studies called decorative sets of the 'general type' (SRBA 2005), were identified by Hilmera as: (i) a 'street', (ii) a 'forest', (iii) a 'garden', (iv) a 'sea, a harbour', (v) a 'military camp, city walls', (vi) a 'hall of state, a cabinet', (vii) a 'temple', (viii) a 'castle courtyard, a foyer', (ix) 'Heaven, Hell (a cave)', and (x) a 'jail'.

It has to be stressed that Hilmera's study covers the entire era of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and derives its hypotheses solely from an iconographic analysis of scenographic designs without a view to the repertoire for which they were made. His conclusions are necessarily very general and have to be particularised for the purpose of this study. The first questions to be asked in identifying the scene types in the early-eighteenth-century Italian *opera seria* are (i) what is the character of the location (i.e. is it interior or exterior)? and (ii) what is its function (i.e. is it public or private)? From this perspective, it is important to differentiate between 'a castle courtyard' and a 'foyer', between 'a hall of state' and 'a cabinet', although these obviously share identical iconographic features. In analysing the likely realisation of such scenery, it has to be taken into account whether the scene is a particular one, to be identified as a specific decorative set, or if it is an ambivalent one, which was very likely realised by combining several elements borrowed from

other stock decorative sets.

The aesthetic ideal of the Italian *opera seria* required representation of sublime, not lowly or common actions; the locations depicted accordingly centred more on palaces rather than on streets. When librettos call for a ‘street’ (*strada*) or a ‘square’ (*piazza*), it is mostly a representative space serving for noble moments, such as a grand entry of the hero. Large scenes with chorus and supernumeraries took place in open spaces (*anfiteatro, luogo magnifico*) and were realised, it seems, with an identical or similar decorative sets, suggesting the architectonic elements of palaces. The decorative set for the ‘city’ is often connected with the ‘harbour’ (see below). The decorative set for a ‘forest’ (*bosco*) is relatively frequent, although its basic significance is connected to pastoral operas and romance pieces (such as magician operas). A more delicate variant is the ‘grove’ (*boschetto delizioso*), often referred to by an array of circumlocutions, such as ‘delightful or exquisite place’ (*deliziosa*) or ‘graceful and shady recess’ (*ritiro ameno, ombroso*), which could be also represented by a garden setting. The decorative set for the ‘forest’ has associations also with different kinds of ‘country landscapes’ (*campagna*), and has a backdrop showing an open space. The ‘garden’ (*giardino*) is one of the most frequent exterior scenes in opera librettos. Descriptions of this location mostly involve mention of fountains, statues, belvederes and other common components of period garden architecture. The decorative set for the sea does not appear on its own in librettos of the period; it is always represented as a ‘city harbour’ (*porto della città*), or a ‘sea coast’ (*spiaggia di mare*), which suggests a combination of a sea backdrop with wings representing either streets, or a forest. Another clearly exterior scene is the ‘military camp’ (*campo marzio*). Given the above-mentioned aesthetic ideal, scenes located within palaces and chateaux prevail in Baroque opera librettos. Accordingly, the most frequent exterior scene in Baroque opera is a ‘castle courtyard’ (*atrio, cortile*). The exterior locations listed above are by default almost all scene locations for which interior decorative sets are not suitable.

Interior decorative sets may be more or less clearly divided into private and public spaces. The private are the ‘chamber’ (*camera*), ‘room’ (*stanza, appartamento*), and ‘cabinet’ (*gabinetto*). The scene denotation often appears in the plural with the name of the character appertaining to it; the *stanze* and *camere* appertain to female characters, such as ‘Armida’s rooms’ (*stanze d’Armida*), whereas the cabinet belongs to the head of state, such as the ‘royal office’ (*gabinetto reale*). Fluctuation in the usage of denotations suggests that one decorative set was used for all of them. Scene descriptions often call for a ‘table and chairs’ (*tavolino e sedie*), which seem to have been integral parts of the decorative set. Another clearly interior scene is the ‘jail’ (*carcere, prigione*).

LIBRETTO AS A SOURCE OF BAROQUE SCENOGRAPHY

In contrast with these private spaces, public and representative interior spaces exist in many varieties. The principal among these are the ‘royal hall’ (*sala*) and the ‘temple’ (*tempio*); very frequent also are the ‘foyer’ (*vestibulo*), the ‘portico’ (*portico, loggia*) or the ‘entrance hall’ (*sala terrena*). The scenic picture of a hallway is mostly decorated with statues (*galleria con statue*); antechambers are referred to on several occasions as having two doors with an important attribute: they are also ‘practical’ – i.e. usable – (*anticamera con due porte praticabili*). Scene descriptions often mention apertures into adjacent parts of the palace (*corrispondente agl’altri appartamenti*), which suggests use of a backdrop with an angle perspective. Jiří Hilmera commented on the high number of the royal halls among scenic designs of this period; these opulent settings gave most opportunity for scenographers to realise their visions (which is equally true of real-life architecture). As the Český Krumlov collections have shown, the principle of these decorative sets was their variability; they were re-used to create new combinations by matching pairs of wings with different backdrops. Among the integral components were layered backdrops and standing wings, which enabled further combinations. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a wide range of representative interior scenes could be achieved with just one or two decorative sets.

Given this rationale, it may be inferred that the *decorative type* (as represented by numerous specimens and variants in the original librettos as well as in surviving scenographic designs) could well have become the only real *decorative set* in the context of minor theatres. It was to little avail if the scenic picture was intended to represent ‘a temple with a statue of the Sun God’, or ‘a large temple with an altar ready for a wedding’; because the generic scene type ‘temple’ would always be represented by an identical decorative set, and varied at most by the addition of supplementary wings and accessories. There is evidence that in cases where the plot required it, an absolutely necessary décor would be made; but for the most part, this constituted only the painting of a new backdrop – as was the case of the ‘Carthage in flames’ backdrop for a production of Vinci’s opera *Didone abbandonata* (Dido Abandoned) of 1735 at Jaroměřice Castle (HELFERT 1916: 274, 318). The fact that individual scene types regularly alternate in the librettos suggests that authors counted on the common practice of minor theatres, enabling productions of their pieces in locations at which only a limited collection of decorative sets was available. It is not certain whether the detailed descriptions of scenic locations in librettos reflected what spectators actually saw on stage, or rather whether such descriptions were there to fire the audience’s imagination when reading the libretto during performance. Baroque scenography certainly operated with a different modality to that of the present day (when it is desirable to have as original a scenography

as is possible for each new production). On the contrary, Baroque scenographers intentionally followed traditional schemes so that their decorations could be used for as wide a range of the repertoire as possible.

The minimal respect for reality in the scenography of this period is, in one notable example, hinted at by Benedetto Marcello in his famous treatise *Teatro alla moda* (*Theatre à la Mode*; Venice, c.1720). Marcello writes his booklet as a satire on the customs and bad habits of current operatic practice, presenting them as the new ‘achievements’ of ‘modern theatre’; in recommending these practices to the kind reader, he subtly mocks them. It is from this perspective that the following instructions (taken from chapters addressed to librettists and theatre painters) should be read:

Introdurrà nelle Sale reggie Balli di Giardinieri, e ne’ Boschi di Cortigiani, avvertendo, che il Ballo di Piroo può intrar in Sala, in Cortile, in Persia, in Egitto, etc. (MARCELLO 1720: 11)

[The modern poet] introduces a ballet of gardeners into royal halls, of courtiers in forests, suggesting that the Fire Dance may take place in a hall, or a courtyard, in Persia, in Egypt etc.

In his advice to the painters of modern theatrical décor Marcello instructs:

Farà un Panno maestoso sopra li due primi Tellari, perche servano questi a tutte le Mutazioni, che non ricercano Aria, benchè in qualche Bosco, o Giardino non farebbero male per coprire li Virtuosi dal pericolo di raffreddarsi a Cielo scoperto [...]

Sale, Prigioni, Camere, etc. tutte saranno senza Porte, e senza Finestre, imperciocche già li Musici entrano per la Parte più vicina al Palchetto loro, ne hanno bisogno di lume sapendo benissimo la Parte a memoria. (MARCELLO 1720: 45)

He should make a majestic curtain above the first two wings, which will serve him in all the scene changes that don’t require an open-air setting, and this configuration could also be used for a forest or a garden, if they at least saved the virtuosos from the danger of catching cold in the draught. [...]

The halls, prisons, chambers and so on should be mostly without doors and windows since the singers enter the stage from the side that is closer to their box anyway,



The Title Page of Benedetto Marcello's Treatise *Il Teatro alla Moda* (Venice, c.1720).
 Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, Vienna. Sign. A 44971.

and they have no need for light either, because they know their parts by heart. The ideological justification for the practices here described is to be found in the high measure of stylisation in Baroque acting, in which characters' emotions and even individual words were visualised by a set system of postures and gestures. For such an acting style, based predominantly on the declamation of lines, scenography represented a certain desirable decorative framework; in essence, however, it was not indispensable. Due to the perspective painting of the decorations, it was possible to act only in the front of the podium, and the more distant parts of the stage could not be used for acting, but simply as a background for *tableaux vivants*. With a view to this practice it becomes more acceptable that a collection of about ten archetypal decorative sets was perceived as fully sufficient for any production requirements of the operatic repertoire.

The methodological approach I have outlined here could easily be well supported by research into the scenographic stock and production practices of particular theatres. Especially promising cases are the Tavern Theatre in Brno and the Court Theatre in Holešov – where most of the operatic repertoire is known,

and where earlier archival research is available. Of special interest in relation to their techniques and practices are the Italian scenographers Federico Zanoia, Giovanni Pellizuoli, Gaetano Fanti, Innocente Bellavite, Vincenzo dal Buono and Giovanni Paolo Gaspari. There are still also many unanswered questions around the Court Theatre of Český Krumlov, namely with regards to the nature and extent of the operatic repertoire, and its scenic realisations. Discoveries regarding the production requirements outlined by Italian opera librettos should also help further to interrogate the scenographic practices of other dramatic genres performed in minor European theatres during the early eighteenth century.

Special thanks to Jiří Bláha for kindly lending me copies of archival sources and for consultations with regards to several crucial issues.

The archival materials discussed in this paper come from the *Státní oblastní archiv Třeboň*, department *Český Krumlov* (State Regional Archives Třeboň, department Český Krumlov), collection *Velkostatek Český Krumlov*, sign I 7 B beta 13 (also *Schwarzenberská ústřední kancelář* [The Schwarzenberg Central Office], sign. A 6 B beta 2a, fasc. II and III).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARTUŠEK, Antonín. 1963. *Zámecká a školní divadla v českých zemích. Materiály k vývoji divadelního prostoru a výrazových prostředků* [Aristocratic and School Theatres in the Czech Lands. Materials on the Development of Theatre Space and Expressive Tools]. Manuscript, Praha 1963. Ed. Jiří Bláha, České Budějovice, 2010.
- BLÁHA, Jiří. 2009. *Josef Platzer (1751-1806)*. An unpublished master's thesis, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2009.
- FRANKOVÁ, Jana, and Jana SPÁČILOVÁ. 2010. Le théâtre de Český Krumlov: une scène authentique?. *Restitution et création dans la remise en spectacle des oeuvres des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles. Annales de l'Association pour un Centre de Recherche sur les Arts du Spectacle aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* 4 (Juin 2010): 23-35.
- FREEMAN, Daniel E. 1992. *The Opera Theater of Count Franz Anton von Sporck in Prague*. Studies in Czech Music 2. New York: Stuyvesant, 1992.
- HAVLÍČKOVÁ, Margita. 2009. *Profesionální divadlo v královském městě Brně 1668-1733* [Professional Theatre in the Royal City of Brno 1668-1733]. Brno: JAMU, 2009.
- HELFERT, Vladimír. 1916. *Hudební barok na českých zámcích. Jaroměřice za hraběte Jana Adama z Questenberku* [Baroque Music at Czech Castles. Count Johann Adam von Questenberg's Jaroměřice]. Praha, 1916.
- HILMERA, Jiří. 1957. Zámecké divadlo v Litomyšli [The Aristocratic Theatre of Litomyšl]. *Zprávy památkové péče* 17 (1957): 3-4: 113-138.
- HILMERA, Jiří. 1958. Zámecké divadlo v Českém Krumlově [The Aristocratic Theatre of Český Krumlov]. *Zprávy památkové péče* 18 (1958): 71-95.
- HILMERA, Jiří. 1965. *Perspektivní scéna* 17.

LIBRETTO AS A SOURCE OF BAROQUE SCENOGRAPHY

- a 18. století v Čechách [The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Perspective Stage in Bohemia]. Praha: Scénografický ústav, 1965.
- MARCELLO, Benedetto. 1720. *Il teatro alla moda*. Venice, c1720.
- MAREŠ, František. 1925. Malíř Josef Hager: Dodatky k jeho životopisu [Painter Josef Hager: Appendices to His Biography]. *Památky archaeologické* 34 (1924-25): 490-492.
- PERUTKOVÁ, Jana. 2011. *František Antonín Miča ve službách hraběte Questenberga a italská opera v Jaroměřicích* [František Antonín Miča at the Court of Count Questenberg and the Italian Opera in Jaroměřice]. Praha: Koniasch Latin Press, 2011 (forthcoming).
- SEHNAL, Jiří. 1974. Počátky opery na Moravě. Současný stav vědomostí [The Beginnings of the Opera in Moravia. The Current State of Knowledge]. *O divadle na Moravě* [On the Theatre in Moravia]. *AUPO fac. philos., Suppl. 21*. Praha, 1974: 55-77.
- SLAVKO, Pavel, and Zdena FLAŠKOVÁ. 2001. *Zámecké divadlo v Českém Krumlově* [The Aristocratic Theatre of Český Krumlov]. Český Krumlov, 2001 (and later editions).
- SPÁČILOVÁ, Jana. 2006a. *Hudba na dvoře olomouckého biskupa Schrattenbacha (1711-1738). Příspěvek k libretistice barokní opery a oratoria* [Music at the Court of Schrattenbach, Bishop of Olomouc, 1711-1738. A Contribution to Baroque Opera and Oratorio Libretto Studies]. An unpublished doctoral dissertation. Brno: Masaryk University, 2006.
- SPÁČILOVÁ, Jana. 2006b. Současný stav libret italské opery na Moravě v 1. polovině 18. století [The Current State of Italian Opera Librettos in Early Eighteenth Century Moravia]. *Acta musicologica.cz. Revue pro hudební vědu* 2006: 10 unnumbered pages. A research outcome of the project *Italská opera na Moravě v 1. polovině 18. století* [Italian Opera in Moravia in the Early Eighteenth Century]; financed by Czech Grant Agency, No. 408/05/2232.
- SRBA, Bořivoj. 2005. K jevištní výpravě prvních provedení Mozartovy *Kouzelné flétny* v Hraběcím nostitzském národním divadle (1792-1795) [The Scenography of Early Productions of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Earl Nostitz's National Theatre, 1792-1795]. *Miscellanea theatralia: Sborník Adolfo Scherlovi k osmdesátinám* [A Festschrift for Adolf Scherl Octogenerian]. Edited by Eva Šormová and Michaela Kuklová. Praha: Divadelní ústav, 2005: 240-259.
- SRBA, Bořivoj. 2009. *V zahradách Thespidových* [In Thespis' Garden]. Brno: JAMU 2009.
- ZAHRADNÍK, Pavel. 2003. *Český Krumlov, zámecké divadlo. Dějiny objektu* [Český Krumlov, an Aristocratic Theatre. A History of the Building]. Unpublished manuscript, 2003.

